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NATO Worry: Soviet in East Mediterranean

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is moving to review its defense arrangements in the eastern Mediterranean region, where some NATO officials and military analysts believe Warsaw Pact forces could pose a significant air and naval threat.

Military Analysis Italy's Minister of Defense, Giovanni Spadolini, said recently that the region, which embraces the eastern Mediterranean, Italy, Greece and Turkey, is exposed to Soviet-bloc forces that could blockade sea routes throughout the area, including tanker

routes, and neutralize NATO forces and bases.

Mr. Spadolini recently scheduled a meeting of the Western European Union in Rome this October to review defense arrangements in the region. The meeting will be part of a reassessment within NATO of its strengths and weaknesses in relation to the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.

Vulnerability Long Noted

Military analysts at the alliance's headquarters near Naples have long felt that the vulnerability of the NATO position in the eastern Mediterranean more than balances any gains in the balance of forces in northwest Europe. Thirty-four Soviet, Rumanian and Bulgarian divisions and about 700 fighter-bomber and ground attack aircraft are available for Warsaw Pact operations in the Mediterranean's eastern basin.

"The range of some of the modern Warsaw Pact aircraft," a NATO report said, "is such that they have the potential to operate anywhere in the Mediterranean, endangering the security of sea lines of communications which are of vital importance to the NATO nations in the Southern Flank."

On land, Greece and Turkey field 25 divisions, mainly infantry, which, according to NATO, are outnumbered in tanks and artillery. The report said the two countries together deploy 4,000 tanks and 4,600 guns compared to 11,000 tanks and 11,300 guns of the Warsaw Pact forces.

Revised Estimates on Moscow

To reach a true estimate of NATO's capabilities, intelligence officers say, the situation in the south should be balanced against the findings of a recent alliance study.

It found that there are 115 Soviet and Warsaw Pact divisions deployed for action in Europe, compared with the estimate of 173 in 1982. NATO, fighting a defensive war, would have 88 divisions, provided reinforcements from the United States reached the area in time.

The difference between the 1982 and 1984 estimates is due, NATO sources explained, to the omission from the

present estimates of the Soviet divisions in the six western military districts of the Soviet Union. Intelligence now estimates that these divisions usually are no more than a headquarters and a single company or battalion.

But in comparing ready divisions, intelligence sources emphasized that Warsaw Pact divisions, while having fewer men than those of NATO, contain about the same number of heavy weapons. One conclusion is that in a short battle a Warsaw Pact division would be able to hold its own against a larger NATO division.

Soviet Weaponry Being Improved

Increases in the numbers of sophisticated weapons within the Soviet forces are likely to continue, analysts add. The Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that the Soviet Union spent between three and four percent more on sophisticated arms last year than it did in 1982. The most significant increases were in high-performance fighters, including the MIG-31 interceptor, the MIG-29 air superiority fighter and the Sukhoi-25 ground attack aircraft.

The impact of the NATO report about divisional strengths is weakened for some analysts because it does not include the armies of France and Spain. Although France withdrew from the integrated NATO military command in 1967, the assumption of Western governments has been that in the event of Soviet aggression on western Europe the French forces would take their stand beside those of the alliance.

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